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Abstract

Few accurate or complete pictures of the issues leading to student protests and the relation of these issues to the characteristics of the institutions and the protestors exist. In an investigation of the content and distribution of protest, the following trends were discovered: (1) protests varied in form, content, and consequences, (2) the most common issues were the Vietnam War, dormitory or living regulations, and civil rights; and (3) the major consequence has been decreasing faculty loads and increasing salaries. Liberal arts and private universities in the East, West, and Central areas produced more organized protest. The issues varied from area to area. Protestors approximated between one and two percent of the student enrollment. The weight of the published evidence clearly supports the proposition that activist students are mainly an intellectual elite who would be considered the most attractive students a school might recruit. Kenniston does not consider these activists alienated but merely going through a stage he calls the "stage of youth" after mastering the ego tasks of adolescence. Bettelheim feels activists are "sick." The author feels that perhaps the activists are no "sicker" than our society. (Author/KJ)

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STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTIVISTS

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Introduction

Although the news media have provided up-to-date and extensive coverage of some spectacular student protests, only the most naive would believe that they have provided accurate or complete pictures of the issues leading to student protest and the relation of these issues to the characteristics of the institutions and the protestors. The intent of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the extent and content of American student protests, some attributes of the students who participate in "activist" activities and some implications of the descriptions of student activists.

The content and distribution of protest.

While Columbia, San Francisco State and other better known schools received the headlines, many others -- large and small, public and private -- experienced "planned, public expressions of disapproval on the part of groups of students." (1) The protests varied in form, content and consequences. No data are currently available on the relative frequencies of protest formats such as sit-ins, class boycotts, picketing, teach-ins, facilities destruction and the seizing of hostages. Nor is there yet available a survey of the changes in institutional policies or practices attributable mainly to organized student confrontation tactics. There are, however, several studies which have surveyed the extent of student protests and their themes in American higher education.

During 1967-68 according to a survey by Richard Peterson (2) the most common protest issues in order of their frequency on American campuses were: the Vietnam war (38% or 316 of 859 accredited colleges and universities), dormitory and living group regulations (34%), local area civil rights practices (29%), student

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participation in institutional governance (27%), selective service laws (25%) (25%), food service (25%), on-campus military recruiters (25%), and on-campus recruiting for defense-related industries and certain government agencies. Among the 27 issues included in the Peterson survey, the least frequently reported protest issues were: insufficient faculty involvement in undergraduate instruction (02%), impersonal undergraduate instruction (03%), faculty academic freedom (04%), faculty tenure policies (04%), appearance of rightest speakers (04%), classified defense research on campus (04%), regulations on student use of drugs (05%), appearance of leftist speakers (05%), and campus rules on controversial speakers (08%).

It deserves at least passing comment that, despite the comments of Clark Kerr, other university presidents and university apologists, student unrest has been little focussed on the inadequacies of the academic experience in the classroom or curriculum; and in an ironic way, the recent observation by S. M. Lipset (3) that at both California (Berkeley) and at Columbia the major consequence of student protest has beeen the decrease in faculty teaching loads and an increase in salaries puts to rest the assertion that teaching or education per se was ever an issue. (The black power student groups in the past year provided the only consistant student demand for curriculum reform although there is evidence that recent new left idealogues are calling for curriculum change based on the assumption that curriculums are expressions of social and political beliefs which can support or undermine the political system in power.)

Among the surveyed institutions the very largest universities most often reported student protests about off-campus matters including local area civil rights, the draft, presence of recruiters and the governments's Vietnam policies. However, in other areas of protest issues, they differed only slightly from smaller schools in relative frequency of protest.

Institutional quality, as measured by percentage of faculty with earned doctorates, was positively related to the incidence of almost all issue-based protests; it was most significantly related to the occurence of protests directed toward off-campus issues, and especially toward the war in Vietnam. Summarizing this relationship Sasajima, Davis and Peterson report that "where there is an environmental emphasis on achievement, scholarship, and personal awareness as perceived by the students, there is generally a greater likelihood of active protest." (4)

Commuter colleges were slightly more likely than residential colleges to experience student protest. But more important than institutional setting are the curricular emphasis of the school and its sponsorship which are related to the incidence of organized protest. Teacher colleges, technical schools and schools controlled by sectarian institutions were least likely to have student initiated unrest. Liberal arts colleges and private universities were more apt to have such disturbances.

There were regional differences in the content and extent of student protests: schools in the South reported substantially less organized protest than did institutions in other parts of the country, and this was most true of protests focussed on off-campus issues. The eastern and the western regions were the most productive of student activism on issues related to instruction and curriculum, faculty circumstances, student-administration relations and off-campus issues. The central and southern regions focussed relatively more on issues affecting free expression of ideas and beliefs.

Finally, campus informants for the Peterson survey estimated that the protests, on the average, involved between one and two-percent of the student enrollment. This figure is essentially unchanged from the figures obtained by Peterson in his 1964-1965 survey.

Characteristics of the activist student

Few of us who were initiated into higher education during the 40's and the 50's could have ever imagined that one percent of a student body -- for that matter, even ten percent -- could force an institution to stop some of its activities despite its wishes to the contrary. Then, there was more than a faint aura of immutability, of social perfection walled off from the outside world. Who then are the students who challenged the universities? How do they differ from those students who wish only to continue, undisturbed, their attendence in classes, their quest for degrees and credentials.

There is no single source of information about student activists which is complete and up-to-date. At this time descriptions, of sorts, can be obtained from:

1. biographical and autobiographical works, most of which appear in underground publications
2. studies of students who engaged in a specific episode or who are members of a particular organization on a specific campus. These are the most common sources of data describing student activists.
3. studies of students sampled across institutions and defined by non-episodic criteria of activism.
4. studies using cross-cultural and historical data on student activism.
5. theoretical abstractions of the dynamics of student activism and activists, namely, psychoanalytic interpretations of activist behaviors as symbolic of deeper, less-apparent motives and forces.

The first descriptions of student activists of this era came from social scientists who studied the participants in the 1964-65 Berkeley "Free Speech Movement." Their data showed that the student participants "were exceptionally high in measured intellectual disposition, autonomy, flexibility and liberalism

as well as in level of ability, and that they exhibited marked qualities of individuality, social commitment and intellectuality not observed among more repre-ntative samples of college students." They were . . . some of the University's -st able and intellectually dedicated students." (5) Compared with a Berkeley sample and a national sample of college students, the FSM activists were significantly more interested in intellectual inquiry, able to tolerate ambiguity, inclined to be objective and independent in their thinking. In comparison with the same samples of students, they were also more interested in reflective abstract thinking in the areas of art, literature, music and philosophy, more concerned with esthetic matters and freedom and imaginativeness of thinking. They were seemingly more independent of conventional religious beliefs. And as well, they were significantly more anxious. Their membership included disproportionate representation from the humanities and the social sciences.

Baird (6) using a sample of more than 5,000 students from 29 colleges and universitites, reported that the high school records of the student activists compared with the non-activists in the sample showed more non-academic achievements especially in leadership positions, speech and drama, and writing. However, their academic achievement in high school did not differ from the non-activists'. Activists more than non-activists were described as sensitive, critical, aggressive, dominating, leading, sociable, very skilled verbally, interested in others, imaginative and self-sufficient. They were in almost all respects more competent as well as more innovative.

After entering college, the student activists were more likely to report that there was at least one faculty member with whom they could talk, that there were too many rules and regulations governing students and that the classroom or lab is not the place one is most likely to encounter ideas. They achieved more in

non-academic areas and they obtained higher grades. Their educational experience was richer with more enrolled in honor programs and reporting opportunities for independent study.

As you might guess, activists come from homes that differ in significant ways from the homes of non-activists. Flacks (7) reports that protestors came from upper-middle class families characterized by disproportionately high incomes. Their parents' educational level was uniquely advanced. One study (8) reported that among the FSM members, 26% of the fathers and 16% of the mothers had either the Ph.D. or Masters degrees compared with 11% and 4% respectively in a cross-section sample of Berkeley students. The father's occupational level was primarily upper professional -- doctors, lawyers and college faculty.

The religious orientation of activist families was decidedly liberal or non-religious in the earlier studies, but more recent evidence is less clear on this point. Baird's data indicated that his so-called activists were raised in conventionally religious homes. Watts, Lynch and Whittaker (9) reported that activists disproportionately came from Jewish homes (24%) and that 61% of the activists claimed no religious affiliation. Protestants and Catholics, on the other hand, comprised only about 5 to 8% of the activist membership.

In sum, the weight of the published evidence clearly supports the proposition that activist students are mainly an intellectual elite who would be considered the most attractive students a school might recruit. And, in this regard, the character of the American activist movements bears striking resemblance to its European and Asian counterparts and to its historical antecedents in this country.

Nothing should be more distressing to a society than to find that its most prized young people are its most active and vocal critics. Naturally, the question

which faces people in authority -- those who represent the society's structures -- is to determine whether, in fact, there's something wrong with the society or something essentially wrong with the critics. And, in a sense, more recent publications on student activism have sought to answer the question of which is the sick party in the confrontation or whether both parties -- society and protestor -- are sick.

Kenneth Keniston, (10) in his book Young Radicals: Notes on Committed Youth, reports his impressions gained from interviewing the student leaders of the 1967 Vietnam Summer program. These students came from family circumstance resembling the favored conditions described earlier in this paper, and the student leaders were acting on value committments acquired in their families. They were not acting out a rejection of authortarian family practices; they were not acting out of a deep sense of hostility or rage toward authority.

Psychologically, the student leaders of the Vietnam summer, had successfully completed the major ego tasks of adolescence according to Keniston. They had well established senses of identity and were aware of personal weaknesses and strengths. Keniston said of them that having completed the adolescent's developmental tasks they had not yet accepted the institutionalized societal roles available to them through establishing a family, taking a job, pursuing a career.

For this stage of development he coined the expression the stage of youth, a phase of development which post-modern young people in greater numbers will enter and complete in our society. (11) Keniston, who also authored the book on the uncommitteed, asserts that the activist student is not alienated, that the proto-type of the activist was the silent but concerned student of the 50's. On the other hand, the alienated student -- from the apathetic, cynical upperclassman to the dropped-out hippie -- is more nearly like the Beatnik of the 50's.

Keniston sees four elements which will influence the course of activism in this country: the production of protest-prone personalities, institutional attributes which encourage expression of activism, a cultural climate which sanctions activist expression and a historical situation which facilitates -- requires -- activist response. And he concludes "criticisms of American society will probably continue and intensify on two ground first. That it has excluded a significant minority from its prosperity, and, second, that affluence alone is empty without humanitarian, aesthetic or expressive fulfillment." (12)

Representing a polar viewpoint among behavioral scientists is Bruno Bettelheim.(13) Bettelheim asserts that the male activists are the product of inadequate socialization experiences in the home. More explicitly, Bettelheim asserts that the home life of male activists did not provide the growing boys a chance to work through their Oedipal competition with the father. Thus, today's male activist assults the constituted governmental authority as a way of working through unsettled relationships with authority. The Oedipal imagery is striking in this regard. The activist male is attempting to take Alma Mater by force away from in loco pater and have her all to himself. Father reacts jealously by saying -- the charter prevents me from sharing my relationships with Alma Mater and so the scene is acted out.

Bettelheim's analysis has some awkwardeness in it even if you grant the basic assumption in his position. First, he says that the real revolutionaries are the girls -- presumably because their situation precludes Oedipal rivalry. However, it seems difficult to believe that the socialization of women is so much more analytically sound than what's available to males. Second, if you want to do anything about activism now you will have to find analysts by the droves, corral the males and force them to work through their overly amourous attachments to mother. And, there will have to be a campaign to encourage today's father's to be stronger vis-a-vis their children.

In any case, Bettelheim's position is that the male activist is in fact "sick." And, you should know that he has recently testified before a congressional sub-committee that part of America's problem with student unrest is that too many students who really don't belong are being encouraged to attend college.

I am willing to concede that among the activists there are those who by almost any standard are ill, but I insist also that our society by almost any standard is also mentally ill.

Addenda and References

1. Most of the descriptions of student activists are based on data collected between the years of 1964-1966. It is really an open question whether such data can be generalized to the present-day activist populations. The absence of descriptions of black student activists presents a notable gap in the coverage of student activism.

2. Richard Peterson, the author of the E.T.S. pamphlets on the scope of organized student protest in 1964-65 and 1967-68, in a brief conversation mentioned that: (1) 75 percent of the schools surveyed in his most recent study had at least one episode of organized student protest in 1967-68, (2) among the large public universities virtually all had had some organized student protest, and (3) there are now underway several large studies to determine the consequences of student protest in terms of institutional changes in structure and policies.

3. Some other useful references on student activism are:

Altbach, P. Student Politics and Higher Education in the United States: A Select Bibliography, St. Louis, Missouri: United Ministries in Higher Education, 1968.
(This is the most complete guide to the literature on student activists and contains, as well, excellent essays by Seymour M. Lipset and Philip Altbach.)

Cohen, Mitchell and Dennis Hale, eds. The Student Left: An Anthology, Boston: Beacon, 1966.

Feuer, L. Conflict of Generations, New York; Basic Books, 1968.
(This contains historical and cross-cultural descriptions of student political protest as well as reports of the most recent American episodes.)

Jacobs, P. and Saul Landau. The New Radicals, New York: Vintage, 1966.

The Cox Commission. Crisis at Columbia, New York: Vintage, 1968.

1. Peterson, R. E. The Scope of Organized Student Protest in 1967-1968. Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service. p. 6

2. Ibid.

3. "Violance and power on campus: a debate." Change in Higher Education. March-April, 1969 p. 28

4. Sasajima, M., Davis, J. and R. Peterson. "Organized student protest and institutional climate." American Educational Research Journal. 5 May 1968 p. 296.

5. Trent, S. and Craise. J. "Commitment and Conformity in the American College." Journal of Social Issues 1967, 23, 34-51.

6. Baird, L. A Study of Student Activism. Paper read at AERA, 1969.

7. Flocks, R. "The Liberated Generation: Roots of student protest." Journal of Social Issues. 1967, 23, 52-75.

8. Watts W. and Whitlaken. D. "Fee speech advocates at Berkeley." Journal of applied Behavioral Science. 1966, 2, 41

9. Watts, W., Lynch, S. and D. Whittaher, "Alienation and Activsm in todays college-age youth." Journal of Counseling Psychology. 1969, 16, 1-7.

10. Keniston, Kenneth Young Radicals: Notes on Committed. Youth. New York, N. Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc. 1968.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Bettelheim B. quoted in Des Moines Register article by William Braden.